



TITLE:

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CITATION:

Peden, Knox. Truth and Consequences: Political Judgment and Historical Knowledge in Foucault and Althusser. ZINBUN 2017, 47: 33-47

ISSUE DATE:

2017-03

URL:

<https://doi.org/10.14989/225137>

RIGHT:

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International Workshop “Power-Knowledge” or “State Apparatus”?

Truth and Consequences: Political Judgment and Historical Knowledge in Foucault and Althusser

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ABSTRACT: This article considers the connections between Foucault’s work and Althusser’s ideas in the early 1970s, when Foucault was delivering the lectures that would result in the publication of *Discipline and Punish* in 1975. The central claim is that Foucault’s critique of the rationalist aspirations of the Althusserians, especially with regard to knowledge of the past, is inextricable from his effort to articulate a political alternative to their work. But in targeting the Althusserians’ pretensions to yield something like “true ideas” about economic exploitation, Foucault deprives himself of a sound epistemological base in which to ground and orient his own political judgments. Various ambiguities ensue, relating not least to Foucault’s obscure relationship to neoliberalism in the last years of his career.

KEYWORDS: Althusser, Foucault, ideology, historical epistemology, neoliberalism

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This article benefitted from Yoshihiko Ichida’s perceptive criticisms and from discussions with Bernard Harcourt, Yoshiyuki Koizumi, Yoshiaki Mihara, Kenta Ohji, and Yutaka Nagahara. My thanks go to Yoshihiko Ichida and Kenta Ohji for the invitation to present the first version of these arguments in Kyoto in March 2016. Research for this article was supported by the Australian Research Council (DE140101770).

“As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others,
never to oneself (unless one is really a Spinozist or a Marxist,
which, in this matter, is to be exactly the same thing).”
– Louis Althusser, 1970¹

Michel Foucault’s mentions of Spinoza are few but inconsistent. Rumor has it he requested a copy of Spinoza’s *Ethics* on his deathbed. Years earlier, in 1971, he turned to Spinoza at the climax of his exchange with Noam Chomsky to add authority to his claim that, when the proletariat seizes power, it will be because it can and wants to, not because the action is just. The primacy accorded to power over anything recognizable as right, in a liberal sense, is an abiding feature of Foucault’s work from the early 1970s onward. And it’s true that one of the most provocative elements of Spinoza’s political thought was his rendering of power and right co-extensive in the pages of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. These affinities between Foucault and Spinoza are suggestive, which makes the role Spinoza plays in the *Lectures on the Will to Know* from 1970–71 all the more surprising.

In these lectures, Foucault begins to develop in earnest the notion of genealogy as a method for unbinding the relationship between knowledge and truth. Nietzsche is the protagonist in this effort:

But Spinoza is the adversary since, from *On the Improvement of the Understanding* to the last proposition of the *Ethics*, he is the one who names, founds, and renews the affiliation of truth and knowing in the form of the true idea. [...] Spinoza is for Nietzsche the philosopher par excellence because he is the one who links truth and knowledge in the most rigorous way. To avoid the trap of Kant one has to kill Spinoza. One will escape the critique and the old Chinaman of Königsberg only by having undone that affiliation of truth and knowledge to which Spinoza has the right to give his name, since it is he who thought it from end to end—from the first postulate to the final consequences (LWK, 27).

¹ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2014), 265. Hereafter cited as “R” in the main text. Note that citations of Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards and Investigation” will be to this edition, 232–272. Other texts will be cited in line as follows. Michel Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1970–71*, ed. Daniel Defert et al. (New York: Picador, 2014) = LWK; Idem., *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1972–73*, eds., François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, and Bernard Harcourt (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015) = PS; Idem., *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973–1974*, ed., Jacques Lagrange et al. (New York: Picador, 2006) = PP.

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

Foucault rightly perceives that for Spinoza truth is foundational, a primitive concept. “The true is its own sign, and that of the false.” If truth is primary, all else is effectively entailed by it. “Truth is thus nominated,” Foucault says, “as that which founds knowledge as well as the desire to know. It is on the basis of the truth that all the other elements are set and ordered” (LWK, 24-5). Foucault notes that Spinoza’s work accomplishes an overturning of Aristotle. But we can also see how his own project will attempt an overturning of Spinozism. For Foucault, truth is anything but foundational. It is itself derivative, a consequence of power. It is, above all, an effect and in no way a cause.

Spinoza speaks often of the “true idea,” and rarely of truth as such. Semantics aside, it’s clear that Spinoza nevertheless exemplifies the classical age that is central to Foucault’s historical schema. To be sure, he garners virtually no mention in *The Order of Things*. But the comments in *Lectures on the Will to Know* show that, for Foucault, Spinoza’s thought is representational in the sense described in his archaeology of the human sciences. A “true idea” is representational to the extent that it corresponds to the object it is an idea *of*; it is a matter of agreement (*convenientia*) between an idea and its object (*ideatum*). By contrast, an “adequate idea” is one determined as such by its internal structure. In this sense, true ideas figure in what we commonly recognize as correspondence theories of truth, whereas adequate ideas find an analogue in coherence theories. But the point is that each type of idea grounds the other, truth and adequacy are in some sense co-constitutive. Foucault was attentive to this form of mutual constitution. One of the distinguishing traits of Foucault’s work was that it did not treat Spinoza as an anomalous figure in the history of philosophy, but as an exemplary or emblematic one. This is why Kant—the “Chinaman of Königsburg”—is engaged in a project continuous with Spinoza’s, not departing from it. The image of “Man” as an “empirico-transcendental doublet” dealt with at length in *The Order of Things* is another variation on the curiously dual nature of truth as a founding instance and object of discovery—what allows us to know *and* what we will come to know—in the image of God or Substance in Spinozism.

Indeed, the circle of truth and knowledge described in Spinoza’s thought in the 1970 lectures is not unlike that figured in *Las Meninas*. It is a signifying process that at once presumes and disavows its own outside. In *The Order of Things*, the status of the representational is ambivalent. With Foucault, it is not always easy to tell what theoretical figures he laments or applauds, and there is a sense in which he seems to yearn for certain features of the classical age. Yet with the work of the early 1970s, culminating in *Discipline and Punish*, it seems clear that representational schemes of thought are not valorized. They are patently inadequate to a thinking of power in the late modern and contemporary era. This is the normative content of Foucault’s historical schema—an adequate thinking of power ought to be formally analogous to the forms power takes in the age in which it is thought. Hence there is a historical intelligibility to the representational schemes that Hobbes and Spinoza,

for example, produced in an age when absolutist power was largely a matter of spectacular representations of authority. It's not so much that they were wrong; it's that the nature of power, as historically ramified and mutable, has itself changed, so their theories might not be correct now.

The recusal of representation is a guiding thread of the 1972–73 lectures, *The Punitive Society*. Foucault rejects the focus on exclusion and transgression found in earlier writings, seeking to develop a method in which “it is no longer a question of the law, the rule, the representation, but of power rather than the law, of knowledge rather than representation” (PS, 6). His focus will now be on tactics. By looking at power as a set of material arrangements, as tactics, Foucault avoids a situation in which events and forms are treated as representations or manifestations of a power that exists prior to them. “In other words, I would like to approach these tactics as *analyzers* of power relations, and not as *revealers* of an ideology.” (PS, 12). The problem with an analysis that treats State apparatuses as localizations of power is not so much in the localization itself, but in the fact that the method of analysis is representational. Power is bodied forth in the apparatus and the task is a hermeneutic one of getting behind the representation to understand the connection, the ideology that gives the apparatus its role and content.

The concept “representation” is in this way linked to “expression,” which is also denigrated in Foucault’s writings of the same period. Near the conclusion of his 1973 Rio lectures, “Truth and Juridical Forms,” he remarks as follows:

[W]e cannot situate the human sciences at the level of an ideology that is purely and simply the reflection and expression, in human consciousness, of the relations of production. If what I have said is true, it cannot be said that these forms of knowledge [*saviors*] and these forms of power, operating over and above productive relations, merely express those relations or allow them to be reproduced. Those forms and knowledge and power are more deeply rooted, not just in human existence but in relations of production.²

If representations express the truth of what they represent, this is precisely the mechanism that Foucault seeks to call in to question. Likewise, apparatuses are not material representations of a power relation that is antecedent to them. In the later lectures on *Psychiatric Power*, he is even more emphatic in his rejection of the notion of “State apparatus” for being much too broad and incapable of taking the microphysics of power into account. It is worse than inadequate; it actively leads us down false trails: “If we look for the relationship between discursive practices and, let’s say, economic structures, relations of production, I do not think

² Michel Foucault, “Truth and Juridical Forms,” in Idem. *Power*, eds., James D. Faubion and Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 2000), 87.

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

we can avoid recourse to something like representation, the subject, and so on, appealing to a ready-made psychology and philosophy” (PP, 13).

The structural analogy between forms of knowledge and forms of power is crucial to Foucault’s thinking here. In both cases, the form is isomorphic to that found in Spinoza’s notion of the “true idea,” as Foucault understands it. The true idea represents truth, which means one either accepts the truth as unproblematic, i.e., one grants the representation a certain authenticity, or instead one embarks on an effort to understand if and how the representational mechanism works. How is it, precisely, that truth is expressed in the true idea? How is it, precisely, that power is expressed in the State apparatus? Such queries are central to the entire project of critique, in the Kantian and post-Kantian sense. This is the significance of Foucault’s claims in *Lectures on the Will to Know* that in order to avoid Kant one first has to dispense with Spinoza. “Spinoza is the condition of Kant. One can avoid Kant only after having freed oneself from Spinoza. Naivety of the skeptics, of the neo-Kantians, of Kant himself, who thought he could escape Spinoza through the critique. Naivety of those who thought they could escape the idealism of philosophical discourse by resorting to Spinoza” (LWK, 28).

* * *

This last naivety belongs to the Althusserians. If there’s any doubt about whom the gesture targets in this lecture, it is removed by the repeated references in the following years to the conceptual poverty of the “State apparatus,” in either its repressive or ideological incarnations. Indeed, when read as a whole, Foucault’s lectures of the early 1970s betray a kind of obsession with the Althusserian project as the latest avatar of Marxist authority and knowledge. In the early lectures, Foucault uses some marxisant language, and even grants State apparatuses a kind of functional reality. But by the time of *Psychiatric Power*, the concept of the discrete apparatus has been all but obliterated in a dispersed array of technologies and practices. *Appareils* are increasingly out of play, replaced by *dispositifs*.

This article is part of a collective effort to consider the relationship between Althusser’s conception of ideology and ideological state apparatuses and Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge in light of the publication of the early 1970s lectures. Its strategy is as follows. First, it is important to recognize that Foucault’s objections to Althusser’s work on ideology are deeply tied to the mechanism of representation and the concept of truth it presupposes. This is why I’ve begun with an extended effort to establish the structural analogy between the power/apparatus relation and the truth/knowledge relation, wherein the latter expresses the former in each case. But the second and arguably main point is this: Foucault’s rejection of this framework is not simply a theoretical corrective. It is the central move in his effort to develop a mode of historical analysis that would not be a form of political judgment in itself.

In a word, Foucault seeks to de-politicize the account of history grounded in the concept of the “mode of production” on offer from Althusser, while retaining many of its relational and structural components. It goes without saying that a purposive effort to de-politicize an opponent’s account is itself a political gesture. What’s specific to Foucault’s attempt—and what I mean by calling this effort one of de-politicization—is his hope to produce a historical account that is, if not objective, then at least neutral, and that would thereby allow us to rethink politics not as a matter of contestable judgments in which questions of truth and falsity are unavoidable but instead as a matter of taking up and occupying various positions within a distributional network that is constantly in flux. This is the meaning of Foucault’s notorious remark that we still not have beheaded the king in theory. The peculiarity of Marxists is that they’ve replaced the king with the authority of their own historical epistemology. If we keep our eyes focused on the political nature of Foucault’s intervention over the early 1970s, one of the enigmas of his silent dialogue with Althusser in these years becomes salient. As several commentators have noted—Etienne Balibar, most emphatically—the Marxist account that Foucault targets in these lectures seems conspicuously like the vulgar framework that was the object of criticism in Althusser’s own work.³ To be sure, Foucault had no access to the full manuscript, later published in French as *Sur la reproduction*, whence the famous Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses essay (henceforth, “the ISA essay”) was pulled. But a comparison with the ISA essay in the form in which it appeared in *La Pensée* in 1970 is enough to suggest that Foucault handled Althusser’s positions in a manner as puzzling as it was cavalier.

The handling is less puzzling if we consider that the finer points of relational, material analysis are hardly at issue. What matters is the politics, and the political stances that an Althusserian analysis of the past warrants in the present. Althusser’s goal in these years was to develop a materialist account of exploitation that continued to grant primacy to economic relations as the generator of inequality, yet that posited the political sphere—the place then and now occupied by the state—as the site in which actions that could alter the economic sphere needed to take place. Foucault rejects this vision of localized power in the state, which concentrates and represents politically the truth or reality of the economy, itself a cipher for the mode of production. What troubles Foucault in the Althusserian vision is the idea that a faction of political actors could occupy the State apparatus and refashion it to more just ends. This faction would think itself in possession of the “truth,” which would serve as the pathway to the “just.”

Foucault regards such an eventuality as consistent with the authoritarianism of the

³ See “Lettre d’Etienne Balibar à l’éditeur du cours” in Michel Foucault, *Théories et institutions pénales, Cours au Collège de France, 1971–1972*, eds. François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, et Bernard E. Harcourt (Paris: Seuil, 2015), 285–89.

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

human sciences that have sustained power throughout the modern age. Here again, some comments in his exchange with Chomsky—which took place during the delivery of the 1971–72 lecture course *Théories et institutions pénales*—seem pertinent. There, Foucault criticizes any vision of justice that borrows its forms from the milieu in which such agitation emerges. For example, he suggests that the communist utopia articulated by the Bolsheviks is effectively a bourgeois utopia (decent workday, free time, safe and contented family unit...) The implication is that communism in its Soviet form is not an alternative to liberal forms of domination but an exacerbation of them. The rejection of Althusserianism follows suit to the extent that its political aims are confined by the same horizon. A case could be made that Foucault's judgment of Althusserianism is unjust, in that he fails to appreciate that rescuing Marxism from Stalinism and its legacy was the prime goal of Althusser's effort. Such is not my aim here. Instead, I want to focus on two aspects of the theoretical relation between Althusser and Foucault in order to sharpen our vision of the political differences between them.

In the first instance, I'll argue that the concept of power at work in the ISA essay and related writings is essential to a vision of politics based in an appeal to facts of the matter, which entails the possibility that one can be right or wrong in one's judgments about the relations of production and their functional role in a given political unit. In a word, one can have a true idea about exploitation. Described in this way, this position is precisely what troubles Foucault and Foucauldians. But my aim will be to show that the contrastive vision of power on offer from Foucault is one in which political judgment goes by the board. One can always disagree with Althusser, which is to his credit. The descriptive analyses on offer from Foucault are motivated in part by an effort to render the idea of political judgment and hence political disagreement inapplicable to historical interpretation.

The second point concerns the canonical relation in Marxism between the means of production and the relations of production. Nearly all of Foucault's allusions to Marxist grammar focus on the latter: the relations of production. One never hears mention of the means and who owns them, or the natural world as a kind of limit to what can be manipulated and exploited in the production process. By contrast the distinction and relation between means and relations of production was not simply central to Althusser's corrective to Stalinism. It was central to the concept of ideology developed in the ISA essay. In light of Althusser's ideas, I want to suggest that Foucault's conceptual indifference to the means of production results in a failure to distinguish between the means and relations of production. The obliteration of any distinction between means and relations of production is not coincidentally central to the project of neoliberalism and is given its starkest form in the concept of "human capital." I'll conclude with the suggestion that an Althusserian prism sheds new light on the most controversial aspect of Foucault's project in recent years: its relationship to neoliberalism.

I. *Labor and Labor-Power, State and State Power*

Foucault's critique of power in the liberal and Marxist visions (the Hobbesian and the Althusserian) is that it is too monolithic and that it treats power as a substance to be held, transferred, or lost. This suggests that Foucault regards power above all as a relation, whereas his opponents treat it as a kind of essence. Foucault's critique of an essentialist vision of power—that there is one kind of power, manifested in myriad forms—has a certain attraction to it. But it is hard to see how his own conception is any less essentialist, albeit in a logical rather than a metaphysical sense. There must be some unifying feature of the phenomenon of power that allows the concept to be applied in myriad instances, even if such a feature is functional rather than substantial.

In his 28 March 1973 lecture, where he more or less explicitly demarcates his project from Althusser's along four theoretical schemas, Foucault begins by challenging the idea that power is something one possesses. He writes: "There is a class that possesses power: the bourgeoisie. Certainly, the formula: 'such a class has power' has political value, but it cannot be used for a historical analysis" (PS, 228). This apparently anodyne qualification is in fact fraught with implications because it suggests that an operational distinction can be maintained between historical analysis and political judgment. If the Althusserian perspective is factional and thus blinkered, the Foucauldian one on offer aims to be purely descriptive and more comprehensive. Again, the conjecture becomes more definitive in the following year's course: "[P]ower is never something that someone possesses, any more than it is something that emanates from someone. Power does not belong to anyone or even to a group; there is only power because there is dispersion, relays, networks, reciprocal supports, differences of potential, discrepancies, etcetera. It is in this system of differences, which have to be analyzed, that power can start to function" (PP, 4). Gilles Deleuze appreciated the full import of such pronouncements when he drew out the political implications of Foucault's effort: "Now, what does it mean to speak for oneself rather than for others? [...] It's a matter of naming the impersonal physical and mental forces that you confront and fight as soon as you try to reach a goal, and only becoming aware of the goal in the fight itself. In this sense, Being itself is political."⁴

"Being itself is political." If power is to be local but never isolated, if it is never a discrete entity, then it is truly a phenomenon of an ontological order. There is an ambiguity in Foucault's relationship to the idea of the local. Power normalizes, and thereby imposes homogeneity. But it also individuates.⁵ It is everywhere, but it is only ever local. Foucault categorically rejects the totalizing perspective for being too captive to a logic of expression;

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 88, translation modified. Idem., *Pourparlers, 1972–1990* (Paris: Minuit, 1990/2003), 121.

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

the focus on dispersal and non-unified arrays is an effort to articulate a countervailing perspective.⁶ It is well known that Althusser rejected Hegelian totality for the same reason. So what, then, is really at stake in their different conceptions of power?

The ISA essay contains a crucial distinction between the State (or State apparatus) and State power, which is completely unremarked in Foucault's work of the period. Foucault treats the concept of power in Althusser's essay in essentially substantialist terms. But it seems clear that for Althusser power is already regarded as essentially relational, and a specific kind of relation at that. For Althusser power is a purposive relation; it is actualized intentional action. The concept of State power in the ISA essay finds an analogue in the concept of labor power as it is articulated and defended in *Reading Capital*.⁷ To be sure, the terms are different. *Arbeitskraft* becomes *force de travail* in French, whereas the power that is Althusser's concern in the ISA essay translates *pouvoir*. But the ambiguity between *Kraft* and *Vermögen* (*force* and *pouvoir*) as it applies to the faculties runs through the Kantian project, culminating in the third Critique. In all cases, the question is one of capacity or capability, also sometimes conceived of as potentiality. Most abstractly there is the analytic need to distinguish between what the thing is and what the thing does or can do. State and labor are relationally comprised unities that we come to know via the kind of analysis Marx offers in the *Grundrisse*. In this sense, as things, they are abstractions. State power and Labor power are the capacities such unities possess and are in nowise abstract. In *Reading Capital*, Althusser takes his cue from Marx's critique of classical political economy for its failure to distinguish between labor and labor power, that is, its failure to distinguish the raw material that is labor from the intentional relation that orients it to specific tasks, i.e., labor power. Labor power does not exist in the abstract, but only in actualized purposive relations. It concerns not necessarily what is, but what can be done in any given situation. It is a concept essential to any description of an action as opposed to a mere event and thus endows the relations of production with their intelligibility.⁸

A similar relation is in play in the distinction that Althusser draws between state and state power in the ISA essay. The state and the state apparatuses in both their repressive and ideological guises are material forms. They are a kind of raw material, whether as brute

⁵ See, e.g., Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 184.

⁶ See, e.g., Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, eds. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni (New York: Picador, 2003), 50.

⁷ Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1997), 20–21; 165–181.

⁸ I develop this line of argument more fully in "Against 'Alienation' (Or: How to Orient Oneself in Ideology)," in Nick Nesbitt, ed., *The Concept in Crisis: Reading Capital Today* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

physical forces or an array of nominally social and discursive practices. But what is their source of power? How do they work? What endows them with *pouvoir*? “Let me clarify one important point: the state (and its existence in its apparatus) has no meaning except as a function of *state power*. The whole of the political class struggle revolves around the state” (R, 241). Althusser comes to this claim after a critique of what he calls “a descriptive theory of the state,” in which this essential distinction between state and state power is obscured. We can read this is a critique of Foucault’s position *avant la lettre*, not least because Foucault often wears the “purely descriptive” as a badge of pride. Such descriptive theories were criticized under the banner of empiricism in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. The core of the Althusserian project, abstractly stated, was to make visible a fundamental distinction between matter and relation that inheres in matter itself and that the capitalist mode of production renders obscure. Capitalism wants to deal with labor alone; it does not see the distinction between labor and labor power that makes the exploitation of surplus value possible. The indistinction is made possible by an ideology that keeps everything in its place and suggests that the motor of such relations is a smooth, natural functioning rather than a political conflict. Ideology naturalizes; it makes it difficult to see situations as political consequences. There is a vision of Althusser’s ideology not unlike Foucault’s *pouvoir/savoir* as something essentially oppressive and ineradicable. But Althusser clearly states how ISAs come into being and how they might be changed. He notes that the predominant ISA in modern capitalism is the educational apparatus (as opposed to the Church in the medieval period). But this is no mere epiphenomenon emergent from a fixed material. Rather, “the dominant ISA of mature capitalist social formations is a result of a violent political and ideological class struggle” (R, 249).

By insisting on the centrality of class struggle, Althusser makes relations of exploitation into facts that must be explained with reference to political decisions and actions. By rendering power fully immanent in material forms themselves, Foucault eliminates the discrepancy between State and state power—or labor and labor power—that allows us to see power as a purposive relation. Foucault’s appeals to the concept of “civil war” are an attempt to avoid this framework. The conflict doesn’t express a discrepancy; the conflict simply *is* the discrepancy. To be sure, Foucault’s criticism of the Althusserian alternative is motivated by the suspicion that one could never be in possession of the knowledge of what “actually” lies behind such relations. But since, for Althusser, such relations are neither natural, nor ontological, but exhaustively political in the first place the criticism is wide of the mark. Althusserian science doesn’t tell you what to do (to the frustration of many Marxists, in and outside of France). It is a means rather for distinguishing between situations that can be explained in fully naturalized, empirical accounts and those that require an appeal to political conflict and hence ideology in order to be rendered intelligible. Relations of exploitation are just those kinds of situations. But when Foucault sees exploiter and exploited as simply

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

two poles in the ontological phenomenon that is power, he deprives us of the means, not for making a claim about injustice, but for seeing which way the power relation goes as a fact of the matter, a fact that is intentional and purposive in its content. This incidentally is what would hypothetically distinguish Althusser from Chomsky. A good Kantian, Chomsky relies on deontological appeals to universal justice. Althusser is more concerned to give a robust epistemological account of how we recognize exploitation when we see it. Justice is to be decided on the political battlefield. (Foucault has never sounded more Althusserian than in his debate with Chomsky, which perhaps accounts for the favorable take on Spinoza in this setting. The contrast between these remarks and the condemnation of Spinoza in the Collège de France lecture a few months before makes for a genuine puzzle; perhaps it is yet another indicator of the context-sensitivity of Foucault's thought and utterances.)

By making ideology central to political intelligibility, as the set of "imaginary" relations one maintains to the relations of production ("the real conditions of existence"), Althusser elevates and embraces the ideological status of his own work. This is what's at stake when he observes: "as is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself (unless one is really a Spinozist or a Marxist, which, in this matter, is to be exactly the same thing)" (R, 265). In a sense Foucault thinks Althusser is captive to ideology—the ideology of ideology, as it were. But for Althusser ideology is essential to political judgment. The concept is essential to being able to distinguish between natural phenomena and political phenomena. This is also the distinction in play between the "means of production" and "relations of production," as the component parts of the core political concept of Althusser's effort: the "mode of production."

II. *Means of Production versus Relations of Production*

The critique of Stalinism that runs through Althusser's work treats the Soviet disaster as consequent on an overweening emphasis on the means of production as the key to overcoming alienation, to establishing utopia. In this vision, politics is directed toward achieving a maximal extraction of labor power from labor regarded as a kind of natural form, alongside the natural material that labor transforms. In this setting, the distinction between labor and labor power is forsaken, just as it was in classical political economy, and exploitation continues under other ideological forms. The task in the aborted manuscript, recently translated in English as *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, is to think about how reproduction works in all instances—how the means of production and productive forces are reproduced on the one hand, and how the relations of production are produced on the other. In *Reading Capital*, productive forces held a kind of bridging position. They were something more than mere means, and thus part of the relations of production. But as forces in the strong sense they were also amenable to materialist analysis.⁹ The first English translation of *Reading*

Capital contains a glossary prepared with Althusser's approval. Here "mode of production" is defined as a concept whose content comprises the relation between two complex unities, viz. the productive forces and the relations of production, each of which comprises in turn a relation among three units they share between them: the laborer, the means of production, and the non-laborer.¹⁰ The finer points of these interconnections partly explain why *Reading Capital*, a work of exegesis, is so attractive an object of exegesis for its enthusiasts. But the goal of Althusser et al.'s effort is clear enough. It is to challenge the sense that either nature or the means of production alone—all the putatively pure material elements—are sufficient to account for the structure of the mode of production and the politics of class struggle. The heretical claim comes through; a genuinely materialist analysis errs when it focuses uniquely on the materials. If the economic base turns out to be inextricable from the political superstructure, then a focus on the nominally material base alone is inadequate. The aim is not to abandon the base for the superstructure, but to gain insight into the relation between them and the complex unity they form.

Althusser's work in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* attempts more clarity, but, as we know, he was himself dissatisfied with the results. In this volume, the productive forces still serve a bridging function, but they are defined effectively as the combinatorial result of means of production and labor power. In this they are analytically contrasted to the relations of production, where we see ideology as the paramount concern. The theses on ideology are designed to account for how the relations of production are reproduced, which is to say how labor is constantly directed away from access to the state as the site in which the relations of production might be transformed. In Althusser's view, the events of May 1968 were not encouraging in that they seemed to redirect, yet again, the focus of political contestation to questions of personal expression and overcoming alienation. In a word, they concentrated attention on means—individuals conceived as discrete subjects; natural units in some sense—rather than relations.

In these developments, Althusser saw political struggle becoming unmoored from the economic base. His challenge was to continue to emphasize the practical primacy of the political sphere (already a heterodox gesture within Marxism) with the material or foundational primacy of economic inequality. In other words, "the paradox is that, in order to destroy the class relations of *capitalist exploitation*, the working class *must* seize bourgeois state power, destroy the state apparatus, and so on, because the state is the key to the *reproduction* of

⁹ See in particular Balibar's remarks: "[T]he 'productive forces' are not really *things*. If they were things, the problem of their transport, their importation, would, paradoxically enough, be easier to resolve for bourgeois sociology [...]. But from a *theoretical* point of view, the 'productive forces', too, are a connexion of a certain type within the mode of production; in other words, they, too, are a *relation of production*" (Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 235).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 317.

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

capitalist relations of production” (R, 127). Althusser elaborates this point as follows:

The economic class struggle, which cannot *by itself* determine the outcome of the decisive battle for the socialist revolution, that is, the battle for state power, is not a *secondary or subordinate* struggle. It is the material basis for the political struggle itself. Without bitter, uninterrupted, day-to-day economic struggle, the political class struggle is impossible or vain. There can be no concrete political class struggle capable of carrying the day that is not *deeply rooted* in the economic class struggle, and *in it alone*, because the economic class struggle is, to hazard a somewhat metaphorical expression, the base, *determinant in the last instance*, of the political struggle itself, which is for its part—for such is its function—the *only one* that can *lead* the popular masses’ decisive battle. Primacy of the political class struggle, then; but this primacy will remain a hollow phrase if the basis for political struggle, the economic class struggle, is not waged daily, indefatigably, profoundly, and on the basis of the correct line (R, 129-30).

Althusser’s worry is that a political struggle that does not keep its focus on economic exploitation has no means for orienting itself in practice. His Marxism is an ideological anchor, but it is explicitly ideological. And the core of this ideology is to maintain the distinction between the means and relations of production, to continue to speak a Marxist grammar that allows one to see a distinction between natural forms that can be manipulated within limits and relations that must be sustained or challenged in no holds barred political struggle.

This distinction acquires a new urgency if we apply it to the exchange that took place between François Ewald and Gary Becker in 2012, moderated by Bernard Harcourt. The occasion was Foucault’s ambiguous comments on Becker’s work in *The Birth of Biopolitics* and in particular on the forms of knowledge attendant to the concept of “human capital.” In Becker’s remarks, capital seems to play a role not unlike power for Foucault. It is what unifies a field of action, but it can take myriad forms. “Yes, human capital is capital,” Becker observes, “but it’s a very different form of capital.”¹¹ What distinguishes it, it turns out, is its limited mobility, the kinds of investment it requires, etc. Certain norms have changed since the days of serfs and slaves. “If I invest in my human capital, I cannot in modern societies use my capital as collateral to borrow loans.” Becker applauds Foucault’s suggestion that human capital is like machinery, but again he insists on subtle differences between human capital and other forms. The fact is there is nothing subtle about the concept at all. Whatever the distinctions harbored in the qualifier “human,” to speak of human capital is

¹¹ Gary Becker, François Ewald, and Bernard Harcourt, “Becker on Ewald on Foucault on Becker,” *American Neoliberalism and Michel Foucault’s 1979 “Birth of Biopolitics,”* Institute for Law and Economics Working Paper no. 614. (Chicago: University of Chicago Law School, 2012), 22. Cf. Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent, eds., *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

again to speak of human labor and labor power indistinctly as means of production. It is to develop a theoretical analysis that excises any role for the relations of production as sites of political determination, preferring instead to regard the world as an array of means to be organized according to maximally efficient ends. Efficiency is indeed the normative keynote of Becker's remarks in this exchange.¹²

There appears to be a theoretical similarity at work in the ontological flattening involved in Foucault's account of power and *pouvoir-savoir* and his later dalliance with neoliberalism and the concept of "human capital." Beyond the formal similarity, such a development is consistent with Foucault's historicism, which seeks always to think power in the forms that it takes in a given moment. So to think neoliberal ascendancy, barely underway in the 1970s, means thinking its forms of power. But it also risks thinking in such a way that eliminates the possibility of forming a set of political judgments and courses for action that would counter such a tendency. Neoliberalism is not the result of an array of anonymous events and dispersals. It is the result of political decisions undertaken largely by state actors working in an international arena.

But to be able to re-describe these historical developments as political events means making contestable truth claims about the actions involved. This is what Mitchell Dean and Kaspar Villadsen are getting at when they write: "Perhaps a provocative move by contemporary governmentality and post-Foucauldian studies and poststructuralists more broadly would be to combine their deconstructivist analysis with *forms of knowledge that, in immediate opposition, claim to speak the truth* about society, mapping patterns of inequality and documenting the effects of precarity."¹³ This goes against the Foucauldian ethos in a fundamental way. In the introduction to *Psychiatric Power*, Arnold Davidson speaks of a rumbling that takes place on the micro-physical level, in local power relations amidst questions of conduct. "It is this rumbling, this maelstrom of battle that Foucault's perspective renders visible, *a struggle that is effaced in a purely epistemological analysis* and that is left out of sight within a theory of power built on a juridical and negative vocabulary" (PP, xvii, emphasis added). Epistemology is deemed out of play; it is what obscures the more fundamental rumble that is the ethical heart of political contestation and that is memorably deployed at the end of *Discipline and Punish*. But without claims to know something about relations of production, there can be no viable development of a political strategy that would be designed to change them. Althusser's commitment to the Spinozist notion of the true idea was essential to his

¹² Ibid., 19.

¹³ Mitchell Dean and Kaspar Villadsen, *State Phobia and Civil Society: The Political Legacy of Michel Foucault* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 177, emphasis added. Cf. Julien Pallotta, « L'effet Althusser sur Foucault : de la société punitive à la théorie de la reproduction » dans *Marx & Foucault : Lectures, usages, confrontations* sous la direction de Christian Laval, Luca Paltrinieri, et Ferhat Taylan, Paris : La Découverte, 2015), 129–142.

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

effort to claim to know something about relations of production and the sites of their potential transformation. Foucault's rejection of the "true idea" in turn and its "ready-made" reliance on an outmoded representational scheme has little to do with the theoretical content of Spinoza's philosophy or Althusser's for that matter.¹⁴ It is rather a means for delegitimizing a certain conception of political contestation that would be based in dispute over relevant facts.

In the end, there are no objective criteria by which one could judge whether Althusser's or Foucault's theoretical frameworks give a better or more adequate conception of the past. But what does seem clear is that Foucault's denial of relations of production as primary in any sense, political or otherwise, is not a matter of empirical disproof or a demonstration of theoretical inconsistency. It is rather a denial that is political in its essentials, which means that any critical take on Foucault's writings and lectures of the 1970s—the years in which the Foucauldian concept of power was forged—will bear an unavoidably political character as well.

¹⁴ Foucault's gloss on Spinoza's "true idea" is not without its own ready-made character. What Spinoza means by truth remains an ongoing concern. For a state of the art overview, see John Morrison, "Truth in the *Emendation*" in Yitzhak Melamed, ed., *The Young Spinoza: A Metaphysician in the Making* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 66–91.